

Desert Wastes...Classrooms...and Research

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Since the last edition of the journal I have undertaken a journey that I long ago promised myself that I would do. I love Australia and have visited many times, both for research purposes and for vacations. But I have never had the opportunity to get to grips – at first hand – with the immensity of it. In a nutshell, to cross it from ocean to ocean (Pacific to Indian). It's a long way...and in the middle there is what at first sight appears to be an awful lot of nothing.

The particular nothingness that I crossed was not the 'big red', through Alice and all that, but rather the 'Nullarbor'; the plain that runs along the south-facing coast of the Great Australian Bight. To the east it stretches almost to Adelaide, and to the west almost to Perth. There are no obvious boundary markers that tell you when you are in it, or out of it, but it and its desolate surroundings amount to something like 2000 km on the highway. Like driving from London to Moscow. Its not a place to run out of petrol – or water.

Place names in Australia usually have either an English or an aboriginal root. Manjimup, Dumbleyung and Naremben jostling alongside Guildford, Horsham and Newcastle. So it's a bit of a surprise to realise that Nullarbor (as classical scholars will no doubt have noticed) has a Latin root: "no trees". It's a very appropriate name and whilst this photo gives no sense of the grandeur of the reality, it does convey something of the overall impression. No trees; in fact no anything except endless dun-coloured scrub and a road to infinity.

But the really astonishing thing about this drab brown wilderness is that it is alive with colour. One has only to pull off the road and wander off into the bush (watching out for spiders, snakes and the myriad other hostiles for which Australia is rightly famous) to be assailed by splashes of the most intense colour. And these are not just dotted around here and there...they are everywhere you look. The photos below are characteristic. I appreciate that readers of the journal in hard-copy will not be able to see the full glory of these colours – so please do visit the web-version where they can be seen properly. Against an underlying gravelly soil, with twigs, stones and shells (the Nullarbor is the largest limestone slab in the world – and was laid down under the sea) a succulent plant throws up a violent purple flower. And next door there is a vivid red/yellow daisy-ish plant...and a soft, sky-blue clump...and a conifer-looking bush with deep red 'petals'. Close-up it is a riot of colour. But sitting in the car, the whole landscape just looks...well...brownish-grey...dun-coloured.

Not surprisingly this colour extravaganza is a product of the spring. After a pretty good wet 'winter' through July and August, the wild flowers are really in their prime in Sept and October. So the fact of the beautiful colours is not the surprise. It is that the awesome spectacle is so easily overlooked as it subsides under the overall weight of drab-grey-brown-ness.

What are we to make of this?



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I remember my physics teacher at school showing us (my science schooling was almost never based on direct experimentation) a colour wheel. It was painted all the colours of the rainbow – in stripes radiating from the centre of the wheel. The point of the experiment however (actually more of a *demonstration*), was that as you spin the wheel, the colours gradually merge and the wheel becomes – amazingly – white. All the colour just disappears. I'm told that what this 'proved' was that white light is actually made up of lots of different colours, but it didn't seem very significant at the time. But – memory being what it is – I was reminded of this demonstration (from about 1962) as I was driving across the Nullarbor. Is all the colour just being spun around to disappear into a dull grey-brown mass?

I had plenty of time to think about this as I was trundling across the plain – and not surprisingly it eventually came to me that this is all just a metaphor...for classrooms and research methods.

Over the years at Goldsmiths we have done loads of observational studies of classrooms. And not infrequently I have been struck by a sense that there is a lot of mundane, routine stuff going on. It is not unusual for the overall impression of a classroom to be somewhat dull. I'm not trying to make any polemical point about incompetent teachers or awful spaces – but rather I am making a point about *normality*. It is normal for children to be just 'getting on' – and just behaving normally – and in rooms that are just 'normal'. And by 'normal' what we mean – of course – is that this classroom represents what might be thought of as the 'norm'.

But equally, when we have been conducting these studies, I have repeatedly been struck by the splashes of brilliance that can be seen here and there in almost every one of these 'normal' classrooms. Maybe a little aside-comment from the teacher that fires up a particular child...or maybe the quirky response of an individual child that makes you stop and think 'WOW'. These splashes of brilliance are also commonplace but they don't prevent the overall impression of the classroom being – just – 'normal'.

It struck me (after about 1,000 kms) that the Nullarbor is a pretty good metaphor for a classroom. Lots of individual splashes of brilliance, but all existing on a broader canvas of normality that has the effect of deceiving the eye into believing that dull ordinary-ness is the norm. Then (after about 1,200 kms) I got to thinking about how we characterise those classrooms in our research. And the more I thought about it – the more delighted I became. Because characteristically we do not use numbers to

represent 'the norm' or 'the mean' of 'the average'. Rather what we do is to *characterise* individual ways of working or particular approaches being adopted by teachers or learners. We focus more on interesting individuality; celebrating differences rather than averaging them. Because averages say so little about the delights – the triumphs and the disasters – that make up life in the classroom.

In the most recent example – our phase 3 research report on the e-scape project – we devote the whole of chapter 11 to characterising the interestingly different approaches that learners have adopted as they tackled the design tasks that we created. Its almost as though we saw the Nullarbor before we wrote it – and deliberately decided to concentrate on the purples, blues, reds and yellows – and ignore that dun-coloured mean. Actually – now I think about it – 'mean' is rather apt as a statistical label.

And as we characterise the many ways in which learners responded to our tasks, we show yet again (as if we didn't all know this already) that there are many *different* ways of being good at designing. Including the red way, the purple way, the blue way and the yellow way. All differently good approaches. I have lost count of the times that attempts have been made to pre-specify the 'right' way to do designing, and fortunately the current e-scape data-base provides ample evidence of the strength that results from diversity. If you doubt me, do visit the e-scape phase 3 report and look through the work in chapter 11.

But this all still leaves me wondering how it can possibly be that all that wonderful colour in the Nullarbor can apparently just disappear when viewed from the car driving across the plain. I wonder if it is a clever ruse by the Pila Nguru indigenous people in the area – magically making their lands seem uninteresting so that we leave them alone. If so, I'm sorry to disappoint them by spreading the word that the Nullarbor is a majestic place and crossing it is a truly memorable experience.

Reference

e-scape portfolio assessment: phase 3 report available as a pdf at:
<http://www.gold.ac.uk/teru/projectinfo/projecttitle,5882,en.php>

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